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PLUS: *Thirty-Two Skeletons* by Michael Knutson; Patrick Madden *With the Revolution in Uruguay*; Erik Muller on *Oregon's Best Poets*; Stephen Potts on *Ken Kesey*; poems, stories, and much more...



LOS ANGELES

I didn't ask her to come, but she came anyway. She stood inside a puffy, green jacket and picked at the paint on my door as she delivered the news. She was wearing red slippers and an animal-shaped hat I'd given her. It looked calm on her head. She rubbed one of its ears and sat on my bed.

I'm sorry, she said again. I suggested she'd already said that.
I'm so, so sorry, she said. So I left.

I called my friend Stan from a payphone on the corner. He was a great man. Stan the Man. Someone should get credit for his hair. He was deep in the drive home from work when he answered. He said he was hungry. He had a wife and a new baby and always seemed hungry. I didn't know why.

After kissing his wife and looking in on the baby, Stan invited me into the kitchen. We ate turkey with cranberry sauce. The scene was festive but only for a moment. Something was happening with the porch light and the crystal window ornaments. A miniature toy Buick sat menacingly in one corner and in another, a shopping bag filled with Styrofoam. The whole place was new. The dishes were new. It was frightening and familiar at once, like a story I'd heard that I was trying to remember.

Stan finally asked what was wrong and I told him about Lizzy and even mentioned the other man's name. He poured more wine, cracked his knuckles and asked if I wanted him to do something about it. God no, I said, we didn't do that anymore. Besides, I said, it was probably for the best.

Best for what? he asked.

Best for all things.

Falsehood of love.

Origin of love.

I mean love breaks its own promise.

I mean the whole goddamn thing is broken.

It's guilt that holds people together, he said.

I took Stan's advice with a spoonful of stuffing, then asked:

How do you do it?
Do what?
Fortify your relationship?
I distract myself, he said.
How?
Fantasies.

We made small talk for a while then Stan showed me some of the new additions to his home. He'd become a serious consumer: doors, drapes, cantilevers, a swing. It was all a big nightmare until he took me out to the new pool in the backyard. The water was lit from beneath and cast a blue glow into the palms. There were a couple kids' toys bobbing around the shallow end, a towel slung over one of the lawn chairs.

What do you think? he asked.
It's a miracle, I said.
Bigger than you thought?
As big as a *state!*
Let's get in.

The water was warm and clean. I swooped down to the drain before slowly rising to the surface. Stan flopped around for a while, practicing a new stroke he'd invented.

Why do they do it to us? I asked when he stopped.
What did she say to you?
She described herself as 'untrustworthy'.
At least she's honest.
She doesn't know what she is.
I do.
What? I asked.
A redhead.
And?
Someone who names her bicycle.
What does that mean?
She's afraid she's lost something.
What could she lose?
Lost, Stan said.
What could she lost?

Something she's misplaced.
Where?
It's nowhere, that's the thing.

Stan took off again swimming slightly on his side, right arm angled straight down, head bobbing back and forth. A single light shone down from the house. The stars marched along and a small cloud hung low over the hills.

I had a little fling once, you know, Stan said.
You have terrific hair.
Remember Sahara?
You didn't.
I could have.
Did you?
I started to.
You either did or you didn't.
She gave me a feeling of security, Stan said. Of living outside myself.
You slept with her?
About eleven inches outside.
What about your family? The house?
And this howling sound.
You could have lost everything.
I wonder where she is . . .
Why?
To have something to think about.

Stan took off again and I sat in one of the deck chairs. It was teak and had a sturdy frame and curved back. I folded my hands behind my head and leaned into it.

A young girl with chestnut hair jumped over the fence and walked to the edge of the pool. She stripped down to a bikini and dove in.

Don't say a word, she said when she surfaced.
I won't, I said.

The girl waved and I did my best to wave back. Stan nodded at her and smiled. She swam a few more laps then stopped in the shallow end and swished her hands back and forth. She had long, tanned arms and brown eyes.

Have you heard what my mother did? she asked Stan.
I have.
Who would've thought?
Not your father.
Some birthday.
He'll have another.
Not for at least a year! exclaimed the girl.
I'm sorry, Jasmine.
Why does everyone say that?
They don't know what else to say.

Jasmine smiled and floated on her back while Stan and I took in the palms. She performed a few tricks in the shallow end then stepped out of the water and lifted the towel off the chair next to mine. After patting herself down, she took her top off and lay down.

What an exquisite evening, she said.
It sure is! I answered.
Beauty *is* youth, said Stan.
Some people, Jasmine smirked.
You never know, I said.
I know alright, Jasmine smirked harder. I knew she had it in her all along.
Try not to judge, Stan said. She isn't happy about it either.
The hell she isn't.
Think about a cigarette, he said.
I don't smoke. Yet.
What's more enticing, smoking or the thought of it?
Smoking, I said.
I wasn't asking you.
What's your father going to do? I asked.
Enter his dark world, Jasmine said.
May I ask who, exactly, you are?
I like to swim in the pool.

We watched the sky for a while and Stan brought out the rest of the turkey. Jasmine giggled when he tried to feed her. Her teeth were big and white like an animal's. When I offered her my creation from the platter she curled her lip and growled.

What do you do during the day? I asked.

I'm a creator, she said.

Of what?

Writing.

What do you write?

I'm still in the thinking stage.

What do you see yourself writing?

I mostly see myself talking about something I've written.

Jasmine licked her fingers and rubbed them on her legs. Then she stood and crossed her arms over her chest.

I knew a girl in my class once who cheated on her boyfriend with her teacher, she said.

I knew a man who cheated on his wife with her sister who was his student, I said.

I knew a sister who cheated on her family with a whole other family, said Stan.

I know a high-school girl who's looking to learn a few things, Jasmine said.

She dove into the pool and swam underwater to the steps. Then she walked slowly back to the chair, lay back and closed her eyes. Stan approached her from behind and draped a robe over her. She grimaced then put her clothes on.

Will you settle an argument before you leave, I asked her.

I have to get back to my father, she said.

A friendly one.

Okay.

Which is more powerful: love or guilt?

That's hard, she said.

Think.

Love, no guilt. No. I don't know.

Could they be the same? asked Stan.

You're leading her, I said.

I can think for myself.

Then what? he asked.

Neither.

You have to pick one, I said.

They're the same.

See! Stan yelled.

They're both fear.

Stan started to protest but Jasmine trotted to the fence and vaulted it. A second later the towel fluttered back over. I couldn't believe Stan's eyes. I shoveled the rest of the turkey into my mouth and fell back against the chair. Stan dove into the pool and stood looking at the fence.

You sure have the life! I said, tears streaming down my cheeks.

Pretty much.

I don't see how you ever leave this place.

Me neither.

He called me a cab then slowly climbed the stairs to the bedroom. I went to the front lawn to wait. There wasn't a single light or sound on the street. It looked like the power had gone out. The cicadas were silent in the trees. Planes circled soundlessly over the city. Down in the valley, traffic crept toward the edge of town.